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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NASSAU 001088

SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA/CAR WBENT

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SUBJECT: PROFILE OF HAITIAN COMMUNITIES IN ABACO

REF: NASSAU 454

SUMMARY

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1. An estimated 40-60,000 legal and illegal Haitians live in The Bahamas among a total population of roughly 305,000. Most Bahamians view cheap Haitian labor as a necessary evil but balk at what they see as the erosion of Bahamian culture as well as the health care and education costs associated with Haitian residents, particularly children. Two of the largest and most concentrated Haitian communities are located on the island of Abaco, where Haitian residents make up nearly half of the total population. Conditions in the Haitian communities are spartan but relations with Abaco's Bahamian residents are not as tense as the occasional media outburst might suggest. Abaco's Haitians face the same problem of de facto statelessness that many Haitians in the rest of The Bahamas do.
END SUMMARY.

Pigeon Pea and The Mud

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2. Of the 40-60,000 legal and illegal Haitians that the Haitian Embassy estimates are present in The Bahamas, the most concentrated communities are on the island of Abaco. A total of 10-12,000 Haitians live in a series of four clusters on Abaco, the largest two of which are known as "Pigeon Pea" and "The Mud." An Embassy political officer visited these two communities in May 2005, accompanied by Pastor Meme, a local Haitian Baptist pastor.

3. Pigeon Pea and The Mud are large communities consisting of brightly painted one-room wooden shacks which house 4-6 people each. The residents mainly come from Port de Paix, Haiti. Pastor Meme stated that the average household of 5 people is typically supported by the eldest male resident earning \$200 a week. Dirt paths connect the congested homes in a seemingly unplanned manner. Trash and abandoned vehicles block many of the paths. Residents on the periphery of the settlements pirate water and electricity from the town of Marsh Harbour. Unsheathed electric wires dangle precariously from house to house. A fire, heavy rain, or hurricane could easily render these 10,000 people displaced. In the past decade there have been two or three major fires in these communities. A fire in 2000 destroyed 20 houses, and left 140 homeless. The Bahamas has no contingency plan for natural disasters or a mass migration to this area from Haiti.

4. The Government of The Bahamas provides medical care to Haitians, regardless of legal status, at four clinics located in Marsh Harbour. Haitian children, who are born at a much higher rate than Bahamians, are permitted to attend public school free of charge alongside Bahamian children. Frequently, health care and education are the two hot topics for Bahamians complaining that Haitians are a drain on the economy.

Residents Risk De Facto Statelessness

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5. Haitians began to arrive in Abaco in the 1960s to work in the agricultural industry. In more recent years, many Haitians have first migrated illegally to Nassau, then resettled to Abaco in communities more familiar to them. Pastor Meme claimed that those already living in the illegal settlements in Abaco try to prevent more Haitians from migrating to The Bahamas by tipping off immigration officials of an impending arrival. They consider what they have now to be a "good thing" and don't want to push their luck in an environment already wary of its Haitian population.

6. Many children of long-time Haitians living as Bahamian residents have become de facto stateless. Persons born on Bahamian soil do not automatically become Bahamian citizens. Those without Bahamian parents are issued a Certificate of Identity by the Bahamian government, a "non-citizen" document which states the bearer's national background and confirms the lack of Bahamian citizenship. At present Haitians may use this identification paper as a travel document to visit

Haiti or, if eligible for a visa, the United States. When the new U.S. passport requirements come into place for the Caribbean region, however, many of these Bahamian-born Haitians will be rendered unable to travel.

17. According to the Bahamian Constitution, those persons born on Bahamian soil without Bahamian parentage are allowed to apply for Bahamian citizenship only between their 18th and 19th birthdays (reftel). Many of these stateless people complain that they applied 5-10 years ago on the date of their 18th birthday, but have yet to hear back from the Department of Immigration. Each application reportedly costs thousands of dollars to the applicant in paperwork fees.

18. Pastor Meme has lived in Abaco for the past 25 years, returning to Haiti once a year for visits. He told the Political Officer that he is confident he will receive Bahamian citizenship "soon", although he applied 14 years ago in 1991, and has heard little from the Department of Immigration since.

19. Haitians born or resident in The Bahamas may apply for a Haitian passport through the Haitian Embassy in Nassau, which would establish their citizenship and identity. Many are afraid to do so, however, believing that any interaction with the Haitian government would adversely affect their chances for being granted Bahamian citizenship. The end result for many is de facto statelessness: they are ineligible for Bahamian citizenship until age 18 or longer by law, and they are afraid to document themselves as Haitian citizens as they would be entitled to by choice.

COMMENT

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10. While many Bahamians are upset at the unregulated Haitian settlements in The Bahamas, tensions on the ground do not run as high as the media rhetoric would suggest. Vocal Bahamians in Abaco say that The Bahamas will be "creolised" in ten years if the government doesn't take action. While some Bahamians see mass deportations as the answer, others increasingly recognize the need to encourage the assimilation of Haitians into Bahamian society.

11. On the other side, Haitian-Bahamians have grown increasingly frustrated at the Government of The Bahamas lack of responsiveness to their requests for citizenship. Most do not want to return to the completely foreign country of their parents, but they struggle against second class status in The Bahamas. As one young Haitian-Bahamian woman pointed out, "The Government of The Bahamas has to figure out how to deal with us. We're here, and we're multiplying."

ROOD